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Four American hostages spend Christmas blindfolded

By Donald Neff
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For four Americans — a minister, a librarian, a diplomat and a newsman — today mark their first Christmas as hostages in the region where Christ was born.

They are believed to be alive and held in West Beirut. The hostages are reported by intelligence sources to be blindfolded much of the time, their world a prison of darkness.

But they can still hear the sounds that led to their captivity.

They no doubt heard the boom and crash of a few heavy artillery shells that one of the warring factions loosed on Beirut's Christmas Eve, scattering crowds of holiday shoppers.

Probably in the distance could be heard the continuing crack of small-arms fire that has engulfed Lebanon for the past 10 years in the endless fighting between Syrian-supplied Moslems and Israeli-supplied Christians and their various sects.

For Christmas, there may even be the chilling sound of Israeli reconnaissance jets, made in the United States, buzzing the city, and the whoosh of Syrian rockets, made in the USSR, roaring into the heavens to meet them.

Perhaps, there was on a pedestrian-filled street the sickening roar of a car bomb, made by only the Lord knows who.

For the four men, familiar sounds all. They did not need their eyes to know the carnage and destruction taking place.

They had lived and worked long enough in the ravaged debris that once was modern Beirut to recognize the comforting Dopple whine of outgoing shells and the scream and thud of those coming in.

They didn't need their eyes to see the results: the mangled bodies, the shattered homes, the fiery holes gapping as into hell.

They were there by choice, doing their various duties as they saw fit — serving church, state, university and press — in a land holy because of its nurturing of three great religions and violent because of its irrational hatreds.

Jeremy Levin was the first to disappear. The 52-year-old Middle East bureau chief for Cable News Network was walking from his Beirut apartment to his office when he disappeared March 7. Next to go was William Buckley, 55, the political officer at the U.S. Embassy. He went for a walk March 16 and was not seen again.

Then came the Rev. Benjamin M.

Weir, 60, a Presbyterian minister who had served for the past 21 years in Beirut. He and his wife were walking in the city May 8 when several men forced him in the back seat of a car and sped off.

Peter Kilburn, 61, was the last. For many years he had been the librarian at the American University of Beirut. Three weeks ago, on Dec. 4, he failed to show up for work.

No word, no demand — not even a hint of what they want — has been heard from the kidnappers.

U.S. intelligence believes the perpetrators are fundamentalist Shiite Moslems out to embarrass the United States.

Sources say reliable information indicates the four men are being treated reasonably well, and snapshots of them received by the State Department and seen by their families indicate they are healthy.

Former President Jimmy Carter, who did not exactly distinguish himself under far more compelling circumstances five years ago in Iran, on Sunday accused the Reagan administration of failing to do enough to rescue the men, of trying "to ignore" them.

All indications are that the U.S. government is doing about all it can, including the sending of special intelligence teams into Beirut to gather information.